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. . . And the Tale of a Transcript

The failure of the Bush administration to understand Saddam Hussein and to prevent him from invading Kuwait is documented in disturbing detail in secret Iraqi minutes of the dictator's last meeting with the American ambassador in Baghdad. One week before the invasion, U.S. policy makers refused to see evidence of Saddam's intentions even when he forced it on them.

The administration has now embarked on a determined effort to explain away its enormous political and intelligence failures on Iraq by focusing attention on its sensible and courageous actions since Aug. 2. But a reading of the complete Iraqi minutes, which are not challenged by the State Department, establishes that the administration's gentler and kinder handling of Saddam must have encouraged the Iraqi dictator to conclude he could get away with invading and then annexing Kuwait without facing American retaliation.

In the same week that Ambassador April Glaspie met a menacing tirade from Saddam with respectful and sympathetic responses, Secretary of State James Baker's top public affairs aide, Margaret Tutwiler, and his chief assistant for the Middle East, John Kelly, both publicly said that the United States was not obligated to come to Kuwait's aid if the emirate were attacked. They also failed to voice clear support for Kuwait's territorial integrity in the face of Saddam's threats.

These statements have turned out to be the most disastrous disavowals of U.S. responsibility toward a threatened, friendly nation since Dean Acheson's public declaration in 1950 that South Korea lay beyond the U.S. defense perimeter in Asia—shortly before the Communist invasion.

Glaspie's defenders claim that she is being made a scapegoat for a policy failure that originates with Baker and President Bush. They have a point, but the minutes establish that she was effusive in Saddam's presence about the policy line of coddling Saddam and in dismissing the repeated predictions from some members of Congress and from this corner of the disaster such coddling would bring.

A key warning from Saddam in that meeting that he would accept a humiliating peace with Iran in order to go to war with Kuwait also appears to have been missed by Washington. The minutes show Saddam suggesting that he sees an understanding with his former enemies in Tehran as his hole card in a broader conflict with Kuwait. He says that Iraq will give up navigational control of the Shatt al Arab estuary to gain Iran's support when war comes. "If we fight, we shall win," he explains.

Explicitly warning that the United States must choose between friendship with Iraq and supporting what he alleges is Kuwait's "economic war" against his regime, Saddam is recorded in the minutes as issuing a threat of terrorism against America: "If you use pressure, we will deploy pressure and force. . . . We cannot come all the way to you in the United States but individual Arabs may reach you."

Glaspie quickly turns the other cheek when it is her turn to reply. She praises Saddam's "extraordinary efforts to rebuild your country. . . . I know you need funds. We understand that. . . . But we have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait. . . . James Baker has directed our official spokesman to emphasize this instruction," she says, according to the Iraqi minutes.

Saddam promises to try to resolve his differences with Kuwait peacefully. But he adds, "If we are not able to find a solution, then it will be natural that Iraq will not accept death" because of Kuwait's alleged economic warfare. He underlines the gravity of his remarks: "I hope the president will read this himself and will not leave it in the hands of a gang in the State Department. I exclude the secretary of state and Kelly because I know him and exchanged views with him."

Glaspie, a foreign service professional, made it clear to Saddam that she was acting under instructions from Washington. But even admirers in Washington's Arabist establishment believe she erred in not seeking to change or dilute those instructions as Saddam's intentions unfolded.

"She could have fought the instructions," says one former U.S. ambassador to the Arabian peninsula. "It is unconscionable that we were not saying to Saddam and to the world in those circumstances that we supported the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Kuwait as a member of the United Nations."

Glaspie ends the meeting by thanking Saddam for clearing things up so that she can leave on July 30 on a scheduled trip to Washington. Despite the accumulating intelligence showing the massing of Iraqi troops, the invasion caught her, the White House and the Pentagon by complete surprise. Glaspie has remained in Washington since the invasion.

The Iraqis, willing to burn those who helped them in the past, have also released transcripts of an April meeting in Baghdad in which GOP Sens. Robert Dole of Kansas and Alan Simpson of Wyoming are recorded as having made sycophantic overtures to Saddam, ostensibly on Bush's behalf.

The Iraqis clearly hope the disclosure of such transcripts will weaken public support for the military campaign President Bush has undertaken and make Saddam look better. That underestimates the American public, which will support Bush in opposing this tyrant now that the president has understood his evil intentions. But when it is over, the public should remember where the political and diplomatic responsibility for this policy failure lies. It lies with Bush, his secretary of state and their diplomats.